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A Pragmatics of Verbal Irony in Literary Discourse: An Example from Drama

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A PRAGMATICS OF VERBAL IRONY IN LITERARY DISCOURSE: AN EXAMPLE FROM DRAMA

Sonia S'hiri (DAL)

Abstract

This paper starts from the premise that Sperber and Wilson's account of verbal irony is adequate and generalisable. It can be successfully extended to account for verbal irony in literary discourse by paying particular attention to the questions of attribution, recontextualisation and attitude communication. The paper further argues that pragmatics of verbal irony should, however, combine this account with a consideration of the functions or effects for which this phenomenon is used in discourse. It is suggested here that this can be achieved through a treatment of sociolinguistic and psychological issues like politeness, solidarity and power particularly in relation to the manipulative function of irony. These points are illustrated through the analysis of Mark Antony's speech in Julius Caesar, where he gradually builds irony up and uses it effectively in order to turn the originally resentful crowds into allies fighting against Brutus.

1. Introduction

An interesting struggle for power between voices can be observed in the communication of irony. The marginalisation of others by inscribing on their words one's own perspective is one of the main features of irony. A voice can be transformed and superseded when embedded in the new context as presented or created by the ironist. The utterance and its actual or possible originator can be consequently ridiculed and/or undermined as a result of this process of recontextualisation. The supremacy of the ironist's voice is achieved at the expense of the evoked one which, because of its incongruity with and inappropriateness in the context in which it is used, becomes the source for negative comment on the opinion or utterance it represents.

Because it is an "art that gets its effects from below the surface," as Muecke (1969: 5) describes it, irony can easily frustrate attempts at its elucidation through an investigation of its syntactic and semantic representations alone since all sentences are considered to be potentially ironic (Furst 1985; Sperber and Wilson 1989). Irony proves to be a highly intricate and context-bound type of communication. A process of disambiguation becomes necessary in order to identify it. Moreover, the capacity of irony to communicate what is offensive in an apparently non-offensive manner, given its duplicitous nature, qualifies it as a successful "way of avoiding censorship" as Scholes (1982: 75) points out, "whether the censor is a politician or the superego." This covertness characteristic of the communication of irony grants its user a manipulative power particularly useful for persuasive endeavours where winning an addressee's support, or at least understanding, counts as a major step towards securing their conversion to the intended position. Recent research in the field of pragmatics by Sperber and Wilson has provided a definition of verbal irony that sheds new light on the mechanisms behind its generation and recognition within the confines of a wider

pragmatic approach to communication.

This paper will first briefly review the pragmatic account Sperber and Wilson propose of verbal irony, described in their book *Relevance* (1986) and their papers published in 1981 and 1989. It will also maintain that this account can be successfully applied in dealing with the problems of generation and recognition of the usually more complex instances of irony encountered in long stretches of discourse, by putting particular emphasis on the questions of recontextualisation, attribution and attitude communication .

Second, developing from this perspective, it will be suggested that a pragmatics of irony needs to incorporate, besides an elucidation of its mechanisms, an investigation of the use and effect of irony as a manipulative strategy in discourse, influencing the power relations between the participants in the interaction, whether they are actually present or simply evoked. Hence, a consideration of a number of relevant psychological and sociolinguistic phenomena might prove essential to its analysis. Examining issues like politeness, power and solidarity, for instance, establishing the role of the self and the other, the ironist and the audience in a particular interaction where irony is involved, can help us achieve a more comprehensive pragmatics of irony.

In the final section, this position will be illustrated with an analysis of the familiar scene from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Scene ii, Act iii): Mark Antony takes advantage of the opportunity to mourn Caesar and turns his originally hostile audience into confederates in fighting Brutus and the Senators by using irony and therefore without having to utter a single explicitly offensive word against them.

2. Irony as echoic interpretation

Sperber and Wilson's account of human communication sees it as a cognitive inferential process. It assumes that it is the task of an addressee to select the right inference from any ostensive verbal or non-verbal stimulus addressed to them. (Ostensive behaviour is at work when a person attracts another person's attention in order to communicate his or her willingness to communicate something or, in Sperber and Wilson's terms "making manifest an intention to make something manifest" (1986: 49)). This selection will take place following the principle of relevance, which assumes that the speaker has chosen the formulation that requires least processing effort while conveying a satisfactory number of contextual effects. By addressing another person, a speaker seeks to modify their cognitive environment (which is the set of assumptions that the addressee holds). The modification of this cognitive environment results in a number of contextual effects corresponding to one of three alternatives:

1. strengthening an existing assumption
2. eliminating or contradicting an existing one
3. creating further contextual implications.

Hence, every time someone is addressed, they will assume that the speaker has something worth their attention and processing effort, and unless an utterance is totally uninformative, it will be considered communicative and relevant.

This framework equally applies to the more demanding, less straightforward communication of irony, as the extra processing effort required from the hearer of an ironic utterance is "rewarded" by extra effects which are absent from more explicit non-ironic paraphrases of its propositional content. Sperber and Wilson consider verbal irony as implicitly communicating an attitude of disapproval, rejection or mockery and to belong to a class of utterances categorised as "echoic." According to them, an ironical utterance satisfies the principle of relevance to a large extent because of "the information it conveys about the attitude of the speaker to the opinion echoed" (1986: 239). They maintain that an ironical utterance "is one that echoes an actual or possible opinion of a certain person or type of person, in order to dissociate oneself from it or make fun of it" (Wilson and Sperber 1986: 30).

Before explaining what they mean by "echoic", it is first worth examining what they mean by "utterance." For Sperber and Wilson, "every utterance is an interpretive expression of a thought of the speaker" (1986: 231). Accordingly, every utterance can be used "descriptively" or "interpretively." When used descriptively, an utterance either describes a state of affairs in the actual world or a state of affairs that is desirable. When used interpretively, an utterance can be either an interpretation of some attributed thought or utterance or an interpretation of some thought which it is desirable to entertain in a certain way. Irony falls under the first type of the second category. That is, the thought of the speaker which is interpreted by the utterance is itself an interpretation of a thought of somebody other than the speaker, or of the speaker in the past. This type of utterance is considered a "second-degree interpretation" of someone else's thought and achieves relevance in two ways. First, as in the case of what is called "reported speech," the utterance is relevant because it informs the hearer of the fact that a certain person has said something or thinks something. Second, in other cases, relevance is achieved by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has in mind what a particular person said and has, besides, a certain attitude towards it. The speaker's interpretation of that person's thought is considered relevant in itself. Interpretations achieving relevance in this manner (that is, depending on others' utterances) are seen as "echoic" (1986: 238).

The problem arising concerning the assumed echoic nature of ironic utterances can be answered by the fact that these utterances need not interpret a thought that is attributable to a particular individual. What makes an utterance echoic is not its actual earlier enunciation - it can be echoic even when uttered for the first time. Sperber and Wilson explain that irony is mostly related, on the one hand, to the question of implicit attribution, and the communication of dissociative attitude, on the other. They suggest that the

> thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it might not be attributable to any specific person, but merely a type of person or people in general; it may be a cultural inspiration or a norm.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson 1989: 102)

and add that

> the speaker echoes an implicitly attributable opinion, while simultaneously dissociating herself from it. What differs from case to case are the reasons for the dissociation.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson 1989: 102)

Hymes (1987) also discusses this problematic point in this definition of irony and tries to explain it by saying that irony

> when intended may not be echoic in a sense that implies a previous or standard use. An ironic remark may be novel. The ingredient of "echoic" mention may be an implicit comparison of perspectives, a comparison of a present situation to another possibility in which what is said might be said, a possibility perhaps in the future.
>
> (Hymes 1987: 299-300)

The echoic element is thus related to the question of re-attribution of opinions or utterances rather than to actual previous pronounciation of them. What matters is that they are treated as such, i.e., as having been uttered previously by the speaker, and that they are used in order to indicate that speaker's distance from them.

2.1. Recognition of irony

Because of its characteristic covertness and implicitness, verbal irony is more liable to misfire than other more explicit types of communication. The involvement of attitude expression through the implicit echoing of opinions is what might jeopardise its correct interpretation.

Besides, it is an extremely context bound phenomenon that involves norms and values whose evaluation and judgement is often relative and problematic. What makes a tidy place, for instance, is not always well-defined and clear-cut: what might be disorderly for one person can be tidy for another. For two people sharing an approximately common standard of tidiness, an utterance like "What a tidy place" said about a place with a floor covered with papers, cups and bottles, unmade beds etc. can be easily perceived as ironic because of the clear incongruity between the state of the place and the standard of evaluation used to describe it (assuming of course that the shared standard is at odds with the state of the room). The speaker here is using the utterance "borrowed" from another context in which the room or rooms are tidy - with reference to a common cultural norm or expectation about criteria for tidiness - in order to comment on the absence of that standard in the situation he or she is describing. The utterance is called upon in order to ridicule the present situation and comment negatively on it.

While irony <u>can</u> be recovered automatically, it might need more negotiation of meaning between the participants in the interaction before it is recovered. The risk is that what might be used as a second-degree interpretation utterance by the speaker can be mistaken for a mere description because the hearer happens to adhere to that particular point of view. This, in turn, would prove that the participants do not share a common frame of reference or a comparable assessment of the situation, against which the irony can be successfully communicated. The result is a failure on the part of the speaker to modify the hearer's cognitive environment in the intended manner. Furthermore, because the failure of the hearer to recognise irony classifies him or her among its victims (Muecke 1969: 35), these cases might be identified as complete breakdowns of communication. When this misunderstanding is intended by the speaker, however, it might be performing a different function in the discourse. It might, for instance, be working as a rhetorical strategy used to achieve further effects in the discourse, as will

be demonstrated in the analysis of the scene from *Julius Caesar* presented below.

The recognition of irony, according to Sperber and Wilson, requires two steps. First, it is essential to be aware of the fact that the opinion presented is an echo and is therefore not attributable to the speaker. It is thus possible to proceed and possibly identify the origin of that echo. Second, it is equally essential to assume that the speaker is using the utterance in order to dissociate himself or herself from its content and/or to make fun of it. Three factors have, moreover, to interact in order for a hearer to reach the effects of irony that reward the extra processing effort spent in its interpretation. Sperber and Wilson say that

> recognition of irony and what it communicates, depends on an interaction between the linguistic form of an utterance, the shared cognitive environment of communicator and audience, and the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson 1989: 116)

Hence, the hearer has to realise that the speaker is saying something "about the utterance" and not "by means of it" and has simultaneouly to look for clues in the context that can signal to him or her that the utterance is "false, inappropriate, or irrelevant" if taken at face value (Sperber and Wilson, 1981) before catching the ironic communication.

The functioning of these points can be illustrated with reference to the famous opening sentence from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* :

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune is in want of a wife.

While reading it, as in all communication, a reader will be unconsciously trying to resolve the question of attribution, in other words trying to answer the question "Whose opinion is this?" or "Who says so?"

The reader might first consider the descriptive interpretation where the utterance is taken as an assertion by Jane Austen or her narrator:

> "It is a truth universally acknowledged ..., I believe."

This hypothesis, however, is rejectable as inconsistent with the principle of relevance in at least two ways. First, we might raise reservations about the adequacy of the claim that it is making so strongly ("truth universally acknowledged"), since there are likely to be at least a few cases where the statement can be questioned. Second, it is contradicted both by the information provided subsequently and by the background facts that might be available to the reader about the ironic nature of Jane Austen's writing.

A second possible interpretation is that the utterance is used interpretively, that is, as implicitly echoing what the neighbours of the single young man are thinking or rather plotting for. The narrator in this case is using the utterance to comment ironically on the behaviour of this community. She is indirectly making fun of their corrupt values and stressing their patronising opportunistic conduct: the neighbours assume things about the

man and start organising his life for him and preparing to introduce him to their daughters.

Further contextual implications can be achieved by adding layers of irony to the situation described. It is clear for instance that this utterance is echoic in a more obvious sense since it is also a parody of a typical opening of the Gothic novel. This, in turn, leads to the generation of further implicatures about the knowledge of the narrator (author) and her sensitivity to literary conventions and techniques, her critical view of them, what expectations she wants to raise in her reader, etc. Her echoing of this feature gives her voice authority over it as she shows her awareness of its existence, on the one hand, and her willingness, on the other, to ridicule it by embedding it in her own discourse, in a context that falsifies it, although only retrospectively, once further reading has taken place. Despite the fact that the attribution is general and vague - to a particular genre of literary writing - the effect is as rewarding as the implicit attribution of the opinion to the neighbours of the young man. Further processing effort can certainly be justified in the interpretation of this utterance. A large number of weaker implicatures can be potentially obtained from the simple device of intentionally leaving implicit the attribution of the echo evoked.

3. Irony and psycho-sociolinguistic considerations

The investigation of the pragmatics of irony does not only involve providing an account that identifies the purely linguistic mechanisms governing its communication. A consideration of its use and effect as an interpersonal discourse strategy is equally essential in order to provide a more satisfactory grasp of its place in linguistic communication. For this purpose, some relevant psychological and sociolinguistic considerations relating to irony will be dealt with in the present section.

It is curious that the functioning of irony, a form of (albeit implicitly) offensive behaviour, should be warranted by its very opposite: politeness. While constituting a (strong) form of aggression, irony proves, paradoxically, to be the protegée of politeness as studied by Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Lakoff (1973): an exaggerated emphasis on politeness can be just as marked as an absence of politeness. It can work as a signal for the creation of distance between the participants in a particular interaction as in the case of irony. Irony, which thrives on the affected pretence of formal politeness, the pretence that gives irony its social licence, can be used effectively for rhetorical functions. An ironist is usually overtly polite while being covertly rude and nasty. As the moral satires of Defoe and Swift, for instance, demonstrate, irony is a powerful manipulative tool of social criticism. While avoiding making an audience feel attacked and ready to be on the defensive, an ironist can discuss controversial issues and lead the audience to accept his or her undeclared goals. An ironist can thus make the interlocutors adopt his or her perspective indirectly, without offending them or seeming to force them into accepting it. This "associative" or "inclusive" effect discussed in Kaufer (1977, 1981) and Myers (1977) respectively, can also save the audience embarrassment or humiliation where its members turn out to be supporters of the undermined target of irony. Since they are not directly addressed, the members of an audience have the opportunity to change their minds secretly and join the "higher" position of the ironist by understanding if not agreeing with the irony. As Booth (1974: 41) points out, an audience is more likely to feel that the meaning is theirs and therefore

become more ready to adopt it, if they reach it using their own mental capacities.

This sense of camaraderie and solidarity between the ironist and the audience may of course function merely at a superficial level where the only indication of its existence would be the actual act of understanding that ensues from deciphering the covert message ironically communicated. It is in fact often disrupted in instances where the audience understands but does not agree with the irony, as in the case of a sexist or a racist joke, for instance. The inclusive or associative function of irony can still be at work, although at its minimum, as a result of understanding, i.e., in understanding without agreement. It is at work in the sense that we would perceive the intended target of an ironic racist or sexist joke or remark but there might be no "drawing together" with the ironist. In fact, the opposite might happen. The associative, inclusive function of irony can be considered in operation if only because it reveals common, shared grounds between the ironist and the audience.

This function, as Kaufer (1977) points out, is usually maintained through the development of a parallel "dissociative" (or "exclusive" Myers, 1977) function which involves the group or person, usually absent from the interaction situation, against whom the irony is directed. The drawing together of the ironist and the audience is usually achieved by means of this simultaneous separative movement that polarises them from the third element or the object of irony. This "audience bifurcation" as Kaufer (1977) calls it, seems to be a common outcome of the communication of irony.

Victimising one's audience is not unusual either, given the threat that an open confrontation might represent. Mark Antony's funeral oration falls into this category since the audience he addresses has been convinced by Brutus' speech of the noble motives behind the killing of Caesar and of Brutus' own nobility and devotion to Rome. Besides, Mark Antony is only granted permission to talk on the condition that he says nothing bad about Brutus and the other senators. He therefore chooses the track of irony to make his point and convert the audience from enemies to real allies thirsty for revenge.

4. Irony as a manipulative tool

It is worth noting that Mark Antony has a second audience of course, the theatre audience, and that his own discourse is embedded in that of the playwright who makes him behave and speak in a particular manner. To this second audience, knowledge of Antony's intentions and of other events in the play is available. Hence, the verbal irony generated in this scene is combined with a Dramatic Irony resulting from the ignorance of Antony's addressees, the citizens of Rome, that they are subject to manipulation. They will have to wait almost until the end of the speech to perceive the irony and substitute it with its offensive propositional paraphrase which Mark Antony still refrains from uttering. This verbal transformation marks a transformation in the audience's attitude and signals Antony's success in reaching his goal.

Analysing this scene, we discern various persuasive strategies that are at work: the appeal to the Roman's and/or theatre audience's emotions, information management, claims to ignorance of rhetorical knowledge (in comparison to Brutus'), telling the audience what to think while, at the same time, denying doing it, etc. (cf Hawthorn's article in Hawthorn 1987). Irony is one major persuasive strategy manifested in the way Antony manipulates the contextual implications of the key utterance "Brutus is an

honourable man" to invert its meaning. His "goal", in de Beaugrande and Dressler's terms (1981), is the alienation of his (encoded) audience from its original point of view and its affiliation to the contradictory stance that will lead it to support him. In order to reach his goal, he relies mainly on recontextualisation as a discourse strategy and on play with politeness and social rules. Mark Antony, thus, continues to recontextualise the utterance "Brutus is an honourable man" as the speech proceeds, leading the audience ultimately to perceive it as ironical on the seventh mention and reject it of their own accord. They shout back at him "They were traitors. Honourable men!" Mark Antony first distinguishes between two attributable utterances and links them throughout his speech: "Brutus is an honourable man" his audience thinks, and "Caesar was ambitious" says Brutus. The discrimination in originators between them conditions the means he uses in reaching his goal. In the first utterance, "Brutus is an honourable man," the opinion is attributable to the audience. Hence, he cannot challenge it openly or directly. Instead, he tries to put it into question indirectly through linking it to the second utterance, which he openly attributes to Brutus: "Brutus says that Caesar was ambitious." The plan is that, by questioning Brutus' words about Caesar, Mark Antony might lead the people to change their mind about his qualities, which they have so far taken for granted.

Thus, Mark Antony starts his speech with a reference to Brutus through a presupposition ("the honourable Brutus") that his audience takes at face value since they subscribe to its truth. Leech's (1983) Approbation and Agreement maxims (two of the maxims of the Politeness Principle he assumes to govern communication) are strictly observed here leading the members of the stage audience to feel confident about their addresser. They are also led to assume, wrongly and naively, that he is on their side (confirming to the theatre audience the opinion expressed earlier in the play about the mindlessness of crowds and their flexibility, which, of course, Mark Antony is fully aware of and is skillfully exploiting). The echoic, ironic nature of the utterance does not escape the theatre audience or the readers, however. They are aware, on the one hand, that Mark Antony's addressees are the implicitly echoed originators of the opinion and that Antony is in total disagreement with that opinion, on the other.

Mark Antony's audience thus mistake his cunning, compromising utterance for a genuine assertion while he does nothing to make them perceive their mistake. On the contrary, he takes advantage of it. As described in Wilson and Sperber, misunderstandings arise from a failure on the part of the speaker "to notice and hence to eliminate, an interpretation that was both accessible enough to the hearer and productive enough in terms of contextual implications to be accepted without question" (1986: 22). The misunderstanding in this case is intentionally caused by Mark Antony. His utterance strengthens for the people an already existing assumption about Brutus, and at the same time, fulfills further contextual implications like leading them to believe that the still unwelcome Antony is on their side.

The strategy with which he chooses to undermine the presupposition "the honourable Brutus" involves establishing a kind of logical relationship between the honour of Brutus and Caesar's ambition: Caesar is ambitious because the honourable Brutus says so. Thus, while undermining the first proposition (Caesar is ambitious) by challenging its truth, he feigns to undertake to preserve the other (Brutus is an honourable man). He continuously recontextualises it and juxtaposes it with the first and therefore leads the audience to re-evaluate it as well. He develops for this purpose several contexts that

highlight various qualities of Caesar's which contradict the claim of his corruption and ambition. He portrays him respectively as the faithful friend, the mighty and glorious warrior, the good patriot, the humane and compassionate man, and the humble leader. At the same time, Antony indirectly questions Brutus' honour by encouraging the people to retrieve the implicature that he is of the same class as Cassius and the others by claiming that they are "all honourable men." As Mark Antony cleverly pauses to let them discuss the matter among themselves, it becomes clear to the theatre audience that the encoded audience (his addressees) have changed their minds about him. Now, "There's not a nobler man in Rome than Antony." Two more mentions of Brutus' honour, sandwiched between suggestions of mutiny and moral bribery, finally convince the audience of the falsity and inappropriateness of the utterance. It brings them to reject their former position through recognising the way it is ironised in Antony's discourse. This recognition also marks the final change of camp: the audience consolidates its allegiance to Caesar and therefore to Mark Antony and declares rebellion against Brutus and the others.

This scene shows the process, in slow motion as it were, by which ironical utterances can be created through a process of recontextualisation and re-attribution. What is first perceived as a descriptive use of the utterance is transformed into an echoic interpretation, except that in this case the audience fails to trace the origin of the utterance back to itself and therefore fails to realise that it has been victimised in the first place. Its final dissociation from and rejection of the criticised position is successfully accompanied by an association and a closing of ranks with their victimiser. The indirectness and covertness characteristic of irony is what allows this complete turn in the audience's attitude to occur and guarantees the safety of the orator. Keeping up the mask of politeness: making the audience feel trusting and confident, avoiding open slander or confrontation till the end; and observing the socially valued rules of keeping one's word, respecting one's promise, and adhering to the conditions for his speech; doing his duty as a friend of Caesar and a loyal Roman (praising the dead man); and addressing his encoded audience respectfully ("Friends, Romans, countrymen"), are the main components that bring about the success of Antony in reaching his goal without open aggression.

5. Conclusion

This paper puts forward the argument that irony is a powerful tool for audience manipulation and attitude modification in discourse. The questions of politeness, association and victimisation discussed above between participants in ironic communication, also characterise relations between authors and readers. They are as relevant to the opinions and actions of the inhabitants of the fictional narrative world as they are to individuals in simpler one-to-one interactions. For instance, the opening sentence from *Pride and Prejudice* discussed above establishes the tone of the narrative and provides the encoded reader with clues for interpretation. It, in fact, indicates the ironic undermining attitude to be detected and followed in interpretation. The same mechanisms governing irony production, recognition and pragmatic effects in simpler discourse situations can, it might be argued, be used by writers to manipulate the readers' attitudes towards and therefore their degree of proximity to the characters, and events in a given narrative.

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